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## **Flashback to Winter 1990**

Tröhler, Margrit

Abstract: New introduction to an interview with Christian Metz, conducted in French in 1990 by Dominique Blüher and Margrit Tröhler.

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## 22. Flashback to Winter 1990

*Margrit Tröhler*

Tröhler, Margrit and Guido Kirsten (eds.), *Christian Metz and the Codes of Cinema. Film Semiology and Beyond*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018

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The following interview with Christian Metz was conducted in French by Dominique Bluher and myself in late January 1990. It was a semi-directive interview that every so often strayed into a wider discussion of a broader range of topics. For at least three hours, we talked not just about semiological film theory but also about films, especially Christian's love for classical cinema and for Ava Gardner (who had just died), and about the contemporary state of film theory, its development, and its place in academia. Both of us interviewers were young, both doctoral students under Metz's very careful and attentive (co-)supervision. We had attended his last seminar on filmic enunciation held at the University of Paris III (Sorbonne Nouvelle) since 1986 (though he was a professor at EHESS). At least for me, this seminar was not just an initiation into enunciation theory and the semiological perspective but into film-theoretical thought in general and into research as scholarly debate, for Christian's seminar truly was the place of open exchange that Roland Barthes talks about.

For Dominique and me, the interview was thus an opportunity to ask Christian everything we'd always wanted to know about film semiology, about his own career, and his relation to (film) scholarship. The interview proper was followed by a dinner during which these conversations continued. Such dinners in the 20<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, where Dominique and I both lived at the time, would be repeated several times in small groups of three, four, or five during the years of his (premature) retirement, until his death in 1993. Christian was always interested in our positions and opinions – on the university, on questions of film theory, or on movies we had recently seen – as much as we were interested in his.

Dominique and I translated the interview (recorded on audiocassettes) into German, at the same time abridging and adapting it for publication in the Swiss periodical *Filmbulletin*, a magazine for a non-specialized readership little acquainted with film theory. (At the time, however, *Filmbulletin*

did have a section – with greyed out pages – for more comprehensive discussions on film and cinema, including theoretical reflections.) Unfortunately, we did not transcribe the entire interview and the cassettes were lost over the years. But Christian did countercheck the German text at the time and suggested some clarifications and additions in his characteristically attentive way.

I still remember the cold February afternoon at the Gare de l'Est, when Dominique and I handed the text over – in a dot-matrix printed copy and on floppy disk – to Walter Ruggle, then co-editor-in-chief of *Filmbulletin*, who was returning to Switzerland after a short stay in Paris. The interview appeared in the magazine's second issue of 1990.

The goal of the interview was to give a non-academic audience an understanding of film semiology, its premises, and its stages of development as shaped by Christian – from linguistics through psychoanalysis to enunciation, with a focus on the latter, contemporary theoretical discussion (his book *L'énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film* was to be published shortly afterwards, in 1991). One of the magazine's requirements was to illustrate the theoretical concepts and lines of thought with examples. Unsurprisingly, Christian was an extremely cooperative conversational partner. Thus, the many concrete moments in the interview – addressing particular enunciative configurations rather than individual films – show his fundamental willingness and ability to communicate clearly, his commitment to intelligibility and transparency, and his methodically reflective approach: in short, his systematic and nuanced thinking 'at work', coupled with the total intellectual and physical presence that we all appreciated and that still resonates today, not just while I'm writing these lines.

*Translated from German by Susie Trenka*

## About the author

**Margrit Tröhler** is Professor of Film Studies at the University of Zurich. She studied in Basel and Paris and was a doctoral student under the supervision of Christian Metz at EHESS. After his death, she completed her thesis under the direction of Francis Vanoye at the University of Paris X (Nanterre). She was co-editor of the journal *Iris* (Paris/Iowa) from 1992 to 2002 and President of the interdisciplinary Swiss Society for Cultural Theory and Semiotics (SSCS) from 2007 to 2014. Since 2009, she has also been the co-director of the National Centre of Competence in Research 'Mediality – Historical

Perspectives', which focuses on the historicity of media. She has published widely on topics such as the intersection of fiction and nonfiction film, gender, aesthetics, and the history of film theory. She recently co-edited the historical anthology *Die Zeit des Bildes ist angebrochen! Französische Intellektuelle, Theoretiker und Filmkritiker über das Kino. Eine historische Anthologie. 1906-1929* (with J. Schweinitz, 2016).

### About the translator

Susie Trenka completed her PhD entitled *Jumping the Color Line: Vernacular Jazz Dance in American Film, 1929–1945* at the University of Zurich, where she was also a research assistant, lecturer, and translator in the Department of Film Studies. She now lives in New Orleans, working as a freelance translator, film critic/writer, and swing dance teacher.